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STATE FOR NEA/MAG - HARRIS

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SUBJECT: THE BUSINESS OF HAJJ IN TUNISIA

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES A.I. DAVID BALLARD FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)  
AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. DESPITE THEIR GOVERNMENT'S SECULAR LEANINGS, THE NUMBER OF TUNISIANS WISHING TO PERFORM THE ANNUAL HAJJ PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA IS INCREASING IN PARALLEL WITH TUNISIANS GENERALLY BECOMING MORE RELIGIOUS. WHILE TUNISIAN AUTHORITIES, LIKE MOST MUSLIM GOVERNMENTS, UNDERTAKE SIGNIFICANT EFFORTS TO FACILITATE TUNISIAN PARTICIPATION, A PRIVATE FIRM WITH HIGH-LEVEL CONNECTIONS HANDLES MOST OF THE ARRANGEMENTS FOR TUNISIAN PILGRIMS. TUNISIANS ACTIVELY LOOK FOR WAYS TO CIRCUMVENT THE ESTABLISHED FORMAL PROCEDURES, AND EVEN DISSIDENTS FIND THEIR WAY TO HAJJ. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) NINE THOUSAND TUNISIANS ARE EXPECTED TO MAKE THE ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE TO MECCA, OR HAJJ. THIS YEAR THE FIRST CHARTERED HAJJ FLIGHT DEPARTED ON DECEMBER 6. AS TUNISIANS BECOME MORE RELIGIOUS, THE DEMAND FOR HAJJ VISAS HAS ALSO INCREASED, AND TUNISIANS TYPICALLY BEGAN MAKING THEIR ARRANGEMENTS MONTHS IN ADVANCE. SAUDI ARABIAN CONSUL HASSAN AL-ANSARI EXPLAINED TO CONOFF THAT TUNISIA AND SAUDI ARABIA HAVE A BILATERAL AGREEMENT THAT DICTATES THE PROCESSING OF HAJJ VISAS, AND THAT THE ONLY CHANNEL FOR TUNISIANS TO OBTAIN A HAJJ VISA IS THROUGH THE MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS.

¶3. (C) THE GOT USED TO ORGANIZE A LOTTERY FOR CITIZENS WHO WISH TO PERFORM THE HAJJ; HOWEVER, THIS YEAR IT REVISED THE SYSTEM TO FACILITATE THE PILGRIMAGES OF THE ELDERLY. THIRTY PERCENT OF SPOTS WERE RESERVED FOR THOSE OVER EIGHTY YEARS OLD, WITH THE REMAINDER DISTRIBUTED AMONG OTHER ELDERLY PEOPLE, THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN WAITING THE LONGEST AND THOSE ACCOMPANYING SPOUSES. THE PROCESS BEGAN MONTHS AGO TO ALLOW TIME FOR SELECTION, REQUIRED MEDICAL EXAMS AND VACCINATIONS, ISSUING PASSPORTS AND MAKING TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS. IN 2006, THE MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS ALSO LAUNCHED AN AWARENESS CAMPAIGN, INCLUDING TELEVISION PROGRAMS, TO BRIEF TUNISIAN PILGRIMS ON THE PROPER WAYS OF PERFORMING HAJJ RITUALS, EXPLAINING HEALTH AND SECURITY REGULATIONS, AND PROVIDING MAPS OF THE HOLY PLACES. THE GOT'S OFFICIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE HAJJ ALSO EXTENDS TO ENSURING TUNISIAN PILGRIMS ARE LODGED TOGETHER AND ABLE TO CONDUCT MANY OF THE RITUALS IN NATIONAL GROUPS. THE GOT ALSO SENDS DOCTORS WITH MEDICAL EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES - AND ONE ASSUMES "SECURITY" OFFICIALS - TO ACCOMPANY TUNISIAN PILGRIMS AND PROVIDE NECESSARY SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION.

¶4. (C) IN ADDITION TO THE MINISTRYS INVOLVEMENT, PRESIDENT BEN ALI'S SUPPORT FOR TUNISIANS PERFORMING THE HAJJ IS ALWAYS WIDELY COVERED BY THE LOCAL PRESS. IN SEPTEMBER, BEN ALI INAUGURATED A SECOND TUNIS-CARTHAGE AIRPORT TERMINAL, A MODERN AND EXPANDED TERMINAL THAT WILL SERVE HAJJ AND OMRA PILGRIMS AS WELL AS OTHER IRREGULAR FLIGHTS. BEN ALI HIMSELF WENT ON THE HAJJ IN 2004, ACCOMPANIED BY VEILED FEMALE FAMILY MEMBERS EVEN THOUGH HE HAS REPEATEDLY CALLED THE VEIL A

"FOREIGN IMPORT" THAT IS NOT PART OF AUTHENTIC TUNISIAN CULTURE.

15. (C) APART FROM HIS OFFICIAL INVOLVEMENT, BEN ALI'S FAMILY MEMBERS HAVE MUSCLED IN ON THE BUSINESS. THE GOT ONCE MADE ALL THE HAJJ-RELATED TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS, HOWEVER THE NATIONAL SERVICES AND RESIDENCES COMPANY (ALSO KNOWN AS MONTAZAH GAMMARTH) NOW HANDLES ALL TRAVEL ISSUES. THE FIRM IS OFFICIALLY A STATE-OWNED ENTERPRISE; HOWEVER, IT IS REPORTEDLY OWNED BY BEN ALI'S BROTHER-IN-LAW, BELHASSEN TRABELSI. TUNISIANS SURMISE THAT THE FIRM MAKES A HUGE PROFIT OFF OF ITS HAJJ BUSINESS AND THAT TRABELSI IS PADDING HIS ALREADY OVERSTUFFED POCKETS WITH PILGRIMS' HARD EARNED DINARS.

16. (SBU) DESPITE THE OFFICIAL PROCESS, SOME TUNISIANS MANAGE TO CIRCUMVENT THE PROCESS TO OBTAIN VISAS. FROM CALLING IN FAVORS WITH THOSE WHO HAVE SOME INFLUENCE OVER THE SYSTEM, TO CAMPING OUT IN FRONT OF THE SAUDI EMBASSY UNTIL THE SAUDIS PITY THEM, AN INTENDING PILGRIM WILL SPARE NO EFFORT IN FINDING A WAY TO COMPLETE THE HAJJ. THE ANNUAL CAMP-OUT IN FRONT OF THE EMBASSY EVEN LED A LOCAL PAPER TO ASK "WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?" TO THIS ANNUAL PHENOMENON. THE SAUDI AMBASSADOR AND HIS DEPUTY ARE FREQUENTLY APPROACHED BY OTHER AMBASSADORS AND DIPLOMATS SEEKING HAJJ VISAS FOR THEIR TUNISIAN EMPLOYEES. THEY OFTEN RELENT AND GRANT THEM. INTENDING PILGRIMS' DEDICATION IS UNWAVERING, DESPITE THE FACT THAT HAJJ EXPENSES (NEARLY TD 5,000 OR USD 3800) CAN EXCEED MORE THAN TWICE THE PER CAPITA INCOME LEVEL.

17. (C) COMMENT: AS IT BECOMES MORE POPULAR WITH ALL CLASSES OF TUNISIANS, HAJJ HAS ALSO BECOME A CONVENIENT MEETING PLACE FOR TUNISIAN DISSIDENTS. IN THE 2006 HAJJ SEASON, IT WAS WIDELY REPORTED THAT RACHED GHANNOUCHI, THE EXILED LEADER OF THE BANNED AN-NAHDHA PARTY, MET WITH OTHER TUNISIAN OPPOSITION LEADERS AND MEMBERS OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN MECCA. GIVEN THE GOT'S DESIRE TO CONTROL ALMOST EVERYTHING RELATED TO TUNISIA, AS WELL AS THE LOCAL BELIEF THAT ONE-THIRD OF TUNISIANS ARE EMPLOYED BY THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR, IT IS LIKELY THAT THE GOT IS CAREFULLY WATCHING EVEN THOSE THAT IT HAS PRE-SELECTED TO COMPLETE THE HAJJ. END COMMENT.  
BALLARD